

## **U.S. House Backs New Safety Standards for Nation's Aging Oil, Gas Pipelines**

By Katherine Pflieger, The Seattle Times -- July 24

The House agreed to overhaul federal pipeline-safety standards late yesterday, more than three years after an accident in Bellingham took the lives of two boys and a young man.

That explosion -- and another in Carlsbad, N.M., that killed 12 -- brought national attention to the question of how to better protect people and the environment while hazardous liquids and gas flow through the country's 2.2 million miles of aging pipelines.

Among other requirements, the bill says operators must inspect pipelines in sensitive areas within 10 years, with re-inspections at least every seven years thereafter. It raises the civil penalties for spills and other incidents. It boosts qualification and training requirements for inspectors.

And it creates a government committee to help expedite pipeline repairs without stepping on environmental rules.

"Frankly, I feel really good about this bill. It is a strong step forward," said U.S. Rep. Rick Larsen, D-Everett, a member of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, one of two with jurisdiction over the legislation. "Hopefully with the action by the House today we are doing our best to prevent losing lives in the future."

Larsen's district includes the site where a gasoline pipeline ruptured in 1999, fatally burning two 10-year-old boys, Wade King and Stephen Tsiorvas. The other victim, Liam Wood, 18, was overcome by fumes and drowned while fishing.

Since then, the Senate has passed pipeline-safety legislation three times.

The House brought together lawmakers considered allies to environmental and industry interests and acted for the first time yesterday.

Transportation Chairman Don Young, R-Alaska, called the bill a good compromise that "protects workers and residents who live near pipelines."

The House and Senate now have to negotiate their differences and approve a final bill. Among other conflicts, the Senate requires more-frequent inspection intervals and community access to information about pipelines.

The White House has not offered its opinion of either bill.

With some hesitation, the oil and natural-gas pipeline industries support the legislation. Benjamin Cooper, executive director of the Association of Oil Pipe Lines, said the House bill gained unstoppable momentum. It was approved 423-4.

"We are going to live with it. Of course we don't like higher penalties and all of that, but we know they are needed," Cooper said. "The industry has made a decision it is going to go with comprehensive legislation and a strong federal role."

Environmentalists also had hoped to gain more ground, including community access to pipeline information and inspections of more pipelines, not just those in sensitive areas such as population centers.

"The bill certainly doesn't include everything we had hoped for, but after two or three years of trying, it is the best that we are going to get," said Carl Weimer, executive director of SAFE Bellingham.

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